

## BEAT GENERATION

### HANDBOOK DEFINITION

“Beat Generation: A group of American poets and novelists of the 1950s and 1960s in romantic rebellion against what they conceived of as the American culture. They expressed their revolt through literary works of loose structure and slang diction. To prevailing ‘establishment’ values, they opposed an anti-intellectual freedom, often associated with religious ecstasy, visionary states, or the effect of drugs. The group’s ideology included some measure of primitivism, orientalism, experimentation, eccentricity, and reliance on inspiration from modern jazz (bebop especially) and from such earlier visionaries as Blake and Whitman. Among the leading members of the loose group were the poets Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Corso, and Lawrence Ferlingetti, and the novelists Jack Kerouac and William Burroughs.” (Bruce Cook, *The Beat Generation*, 1971; *A Handbook to Literature*, 1936-92, eds. C. Hugh Holman & William Harmon)

ACCORDING TO KENNETH REXROTH (essays 1957-59)

1. Beat generation writers are unique.
2. They represent the spirit of American youth in the 1950s.
3. They revive the only authentic tradition in American literature: Whitman, Twain and Hart Crane
4. They are heroes in a cultural revolution against academic and elitist writing as represented by Henry James and T. S. Eliot, who are condemned as too formal, artificial and foreign.

### TESTIMONIAL

“The Beat Generation is characterized by a way of life which can be grasped only by living it. Its nature is ineffable. At its fullest it combines a total rejection of any life governed by conventional space, time or causality with a total affirmation of the self thus exiled. It is colored by some sense of the holy or sacred, and if this can only be found in the implacable reality of narcotics, then let it there be found. It is, in a word, a late and vehement assertion of the native Romantic spirit against an obdurately unromantic American ethos....

The Beats have formed one more crest in the continuing wave of Romantic American dissent--but with this difference. They came not to replace one political or moral scheme with another, but to deny all such systems in favor of apparent *anarchy*. Where American dissenters have often made qualified or systematic negations, the Beats have made a total and immediate sweep.... The Beats would not so much destroy society and its values as simply disaffiliate, and, once free begin a quest for some reality, but one governed only by individual existence [*solipsism*]. It is in this search that the fiction of Jack Kerouac makes an intelligible place for itself in recent American writing. [italics added]

The religious overtones of certain beat writing, including Kerouac’s own, is genuine, not affected. The Beat Generation would settle finally for nothing less than the whole soul: whoever is not with them is against them [compare to *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* where people are either on the bus or off the bus].... They are Beat precisely because none of the older sources of identity hold any promise....

For the Beat who attains it, the proper state is ‘cool.’ As nearly as this term can be translated, it means a poise centered in the self alone without regard to any circumstance, a total concentration in what the German existentialists have called *Eigenwelt*, the world of one’s self only. It is the self affirming itself in despair.... The cool Beat, what Kerouac has called the ‘subterranean,’ is most typically the user of narcotics, partly as an analgesic aid in preserving the stricken self and partly because narcosis is an assertive chemical act.”

Bernard Duffey  
“The Three Worlds of Jack Kerouac”  
*Playboy* 6.6 (June 1959) 79

## HISTORY AND DESCRIPTION

Wolfgang B. Fleischmann

“We are all familiar with the term ‘beat generation.’ It has come, within the last three years, to connote a variety of American artistic and social phenomena. In its widest sense, ‘beat generation’ describes a group of people involved in a way of life, the positive features of which are general resistance against the values and mores of the American middle class, a total acceptance of all types of sexual behavior, general predilection for ‘cool jazz,’ and the adoption of Oriental mysticism in the form of Zen Buddhism as a unifying metaphysics and philosophy of life. The negative features of the way of life described by the adjective ‘beat’ are withdrawal from politics and from the responsibilities of citizenship, withdrawal from the universities and academies, and withdrawal of recognition from all institutions the State provides.

Less widely defined, the ‘beat generation’ is thought of as a group of bohemians, made up of jazz-musicians, writers, artists, college students, and generally dislocated personalities who lead *la vie* ‘beat’ in San Francisco, New York, or Boston--also, in a more isolated manner, in Mexican villages, on the beaches of Southern California, and at various spots in the Rocky and Smoky Mountains. The names of individuals play a larger role in this second visualization of a ‘beat generation’ than in the first. We find grouped here jazz-musicians like Lennie Tristano, Dave Brubeck, and Lester Young, photographers like Harry Redly and Harold Feinstein, writers like the popular novelist Norman Mailer, as well as the poets and authors engaged in the more specifically literary contexts of the movement. These personalities often, though not always, gather in cafes of Bohemian character, surrounded by a coterie made up of the curious and interested. In some of the bars thus frequented, the central attraction is the reading, to the accompaniment of jazz, of the works of the ‘beat generation’s’ writers and poets.

It is the fairly unorganized group made up of these authors which comprises the most narrow concept subsumed under the term ‘beat generation’: the literary movement of that name which, so baptized by its main prose author Jack Kerouac, has attracted wide attention ever since some of its members gathered in a San Francisco art gallery in the fall of 1955 to rebel consciously against the academic tradition in American poetry.

Who are the ‘beat generation’ authors? Even a cursory glance at their biographies shows that they are not a generation in terms of age, ranging, as they do, between the ages of twenty-odd and fifty-odd. Nor are their intellectual, social, and religious backgrounds of sufficient homogeneity to attribute to them a common denominator as to provenance. Are they, then, a ‘generation’ in the sense of literary history--a unified movement of poetic innovation in style with a common philosophical set of beliefs? The answer to this question is not clear at first glance for, among certain ones of the group, a solidarity of style and ideas is readily apparent, though some salient differences also rise readily to view...

Let us begin with the best known ones--Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg.... According to Malcolm Cowley, publisher of *On the Road*, Kerouac works on typewriter strip-rolls without revising. He has defined, in the fifth issue of the *Evergreen Review*, a method of writing fiction based on Wilhelm Reich’s theory of the orgasm. This method advocates self-expression in the total degree: the author creates his style by leaving his words and associations as they come from him in the hot pitch of creative frenzy. Allen Ginsberg, four years Kerouac’s junior, is the author of the ‘beat generation’s’ manifesto, the poem *Howl*.... Unlike Kerouac, who claims total originality, Ginsberg openly declares himself in his poems to be an imitator of Walt Whitman, Maiakowsky, and Guillaume Apollinaire and a student both of Zen Buddhism and of Mayan mysticism. Like Kerouac, Ginsberg is a product of Columbia University....

While the poetry of Ginsberg and the prose of Kerouac dwell deliberately on the sordid, the unmentionable, and the socially controversial, they have a concern with values beyond the material ones... Beyond Ginsberg’s bloody toilets and Kerouac’s bowls of unsanitary oatmeal served in truckers’ cafes there lie visions of a peaceful world made strong by the love of comrades and the joys of mystical insight.... Ferlingetti, thirty-nine, is a San Francisco publisher and the owner of the City Lights Bookshop in that city. Like Ginsberg, he exalts emancipation and resistance to institutions. Unlike *Howl*, however,

Ferlingetti's *Pictures of the Gone World* and *A Coney Island of the Mind* are series of lyrics consciously imitative of William Carlos Williams' lighter verse and akin in technique to the work of E. E. Cummings...

The 'beat generation's' authors are too distinctly individualistic to allow their work to be classified. Nor is there, in the maze of Zen Buddhism, Roman Catholicism, cynicism, hedonism, and surrealism which informs their work, any unified philosophical position, save, perhaps, that vague utopian and pacifist goal of man at ease with himself which is shared by both the religious and earthy 'beat generation' writers....

The resemblance between the Marxist and the 'beat generation' style is striking. [Albert] Maltz [Communist screenwriter, one of the infamous Hollywood Ten] and Kerouac present the same mixture of dramatic human expression in similarly sordid surroundings.... Proof that Marxist prose is of importance for understanding the beat generation's literary tradition does not invalidate the latter. Nor does the absence of a social purpose in the beat generation's writings force us to condemn these and brand them feeble, pointless imitators of Marxist literature. For theirs is a different story, told to a different age. But Rexroth's assertion that Whitman, Twain, and Hart Crane make up the beat generation's direct ancestry must here be modified to include Marxist elements from the thirties....

Since the end of the American Marxist movement in literature, no unified group of writers in present-day America has dared to be scornful both of the popular media...and of the...upper middle-brow magazines of the *Atlantic Monthly* variety, before the 'beat generation' writers took this step. No frontal attack but the beat generation's has been delivered recently, from an outlook neither openly Marxist nor patently *bourgeois*, against the control which the New Criticism and the agrarian fugitive tradition exercise today over the emergence of younger literary talents. It is impossible, in America today, to study American or English literature on the university level without being indoctrinated, at one point or another, with the critical views of John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, Randall Jarrell, R. P. Blackmur, or Lionel Trilling--to mention only the most prominent names among the professor-poet-critics...

The 'beat generation' writers attack this rather rigid tradition, not because they oppose the creative and critical efforts of vested academic and publishing interests over the expression of the critical and creative spirit.... Unfortunately, the 'beat generation' has no unified critical doctrine, no poetics to support its polemic--the extreme individualism which gave the 'beat generation' writers strength to launch their protest paradoxically negates the development of a strong intellectual point of view.... In the light of the experimental tradition in contemporary American poetry and prose, the 'beat generation' writers' claims to uniqueness and originality within it are absurd.... Proletarian literature of the thirties plays a significant part in their literary ancestry...."

Wolfgang B. Fleischmann  
"A Look at the 'Beat Generation' Writers"  
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Michael Hollister (2015)